

STATEMENT OF DANNY D. SELLS, ASSOCIATE CHIEF
NATURAL RESOURCES CONSERVATION SERVICE
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE
BEFORE THE
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
COMMITTEE ON TRANSPORTATION AND INFRASTRUCTURE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON WATER RESOURCES AND THE ENVIRONMENT

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before the Subcommittee to discuss watershed activities of the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), specifically the Small Watershed Program authorized by P.L. 83-566 and P.L. 78-534. The Small Watershed Program has served thousands of communities across the country, improving natural resources, preventing floods, and increasing economic development. We at NRCS are proud of the accomplishments of the watershed program and the many benefits that the program provides. In my remarks today, I would like to underscore the importance of our ongoing work in this area, and discuss our budget and priorities for FY '01.

The NRCS watershed and flood prevention program represents the first and only national effort that helps local organizations plan and install watershed-based projects on private lands. The program provides site-specific technical expertise and locally-based watershed planning and financial assistance for plan implementation. It provides a process to solve local natural resource problems and avoid unnecessary regulation; empowers local people as decision-makers; builds partnerships; and encourages local and State funding contributions and ownership.

The Small Watershed Program is founded upon the principle of locally-driven conservation. Local governments and other sponsors initiate projects with the help of NRCS and local conservation districts. Local steering committees develop plans for the projects and help establish objectives and priorities. Also, local sponsors secure necessary land rights, secure federal, state and local permits, pay a share of construction costs, and assume responsibility for maintenance. NRCS assists in every step, but mostly serves as a technical advisor, bringing science and technology, and knowledge about the resource base and ecosystem of the watershed. The process is driven by the community.

FY 2001 Budget Proposal

The President's budget proposes funding for Watershed and Flood Prevention Operations at \$83.4 million. This account funds the actual implementation of watershed projects, which have been approved and authorized under NRCS guidance. Local communities have responded to the program, and as a result, NRCS currently has a backlog of about \$1.5

billion in financial and technical assistance needs in the Watershed Program. As a result, we will take steps to focus these funds on the most cost effective and environmentally beneficial projects, and when possible, NRCS will emphasize non-structural alternatives and management systems. NRCS will also continue to reduce the backlog of unfunded work by examining approved watershed plans to deactivate or revise those that have become infeasible or where local sponsor interest is no longer strong.

Aging Watershed Structures

The funding request for FY 2001 includes a new loan program to assist communities that have aging dams that may pose significant safety risks. Since 1948, NRCS and local sponsors have built over 10,400 small watershed dams under the authority of P.L. 78-534 and P.L. 83-566. Many of those structures are now reaching the end of their design life and, unless rehabilitated, may pose significant threats to human health, safety, and to the environment. I know that this is an issue of interest to this Committee and would note that H.R. 728, which would provide NRCS authority to rehabilitate these structures, was amended and approved by this Subcommittee at the close of the last legislative session. However, the Administration has concerns with the bill as amended by the House Agriculture Committee, as it undermines the intent of Section 404 of the Clean water Act. Also, as we have expressed in earlier testimony, we are also concerned about the bill's prohibition of cost-benefit analyses and the significant amount of federal resources it requires.

This year, approximately 1,200 structures will require significant restoration at an estimated cost of \$454 million. The need could be much greater and the number of structures that will reach their design life will grow exponentially in the coming two decades. As a result, the President's FY '01 Budget proposes using \$4 million in budget authority for a new \$60 million loan program of loans to state and local governments for the rehabilitation of aging dams. We believe that this proposal represents the best immediate solution to the costly and growing dam rehabilitation problems faced by many communities.

Surveys and Planning

None of the work we have accomplished, nor the challenges we face can be met without the expertise, hard work and dedication of the NRCS field delivery system, including conservation districts and state agency partners. Aside from work associated with the Small Watershed Program, NRCS provides assistance through its basic service to private landowners that directly relate to and benefit watersheds.

Through Watershed Surveys and Planning, NRCS works with local sponsoring organizations to develop plans on watersheds dealing with water quality, flooding, water and land management, and sedimentation problems. These plans then form the basis for installing needed works of improvement implemented using the Small Watershed Program or other federal or non-federal programs. The agency also works cooperatively with State and local governments to develop river basin surveys and floodplain management studies to help identify water and related land resource problems and evaluate sound solutions. For FY '01, we have

asked Congress to appropriate for Watershed Surveys and Planning \$10.4 million, the same level as in FY 2000.

Administration's Conservation Program

The President's budget contains several important provisions aimed to improve the quality of water across the nation's private lands. On January 7, 2000, the Vice President announced a \$1.3 billion package of funding for farm and ranchland conservation within the agriculture budget. This would include expanding the Environmental Quality Incentives Program, Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program, Wetlands Reserve Program, Conservation Reserve Program, and Farmland Protection Program. The Budget also proposes a new Conservation Security Program, that would provide \$600 million to farmers for conservation practices that improve soil and water quality.

We have had many significant accomplishments in the Small Watershed Program over the past five decades and farmers, ranchers, and rural residents are better off as a result. But there is still much more to do. We will continue to inform communities about the status and structural integrity of the existing projects. We will continue to work with local communities to recommend the best-planned watershed projects that our science and technology can develop and will continue to prioritize and evaluate our activities so that the financial and technical resources that are available can be placed where they are needed most.

I thank the Subcommittee and would be happy to take any questions that you might have.